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Everything I Learned About Teaching in the Contact Zone I Learned From Charles Xavier and the Uncanny X-Men

James Bucky Carter Ph.D.

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Everything I Learned About Teaching in the Contact Zone I Learned from Charles Xavier and The Uncanny X-Men

By James Bucky Carter, Ph.D.

"To me, my X-Men!" – Charles Xavier

"The most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories"

– Hillary Chute in *PMLA* March '08

Introduction

In this article I assert that reading and studying comics via the lens of what Mary Louise Pratt has called the "contact zone" can help illuminate important sociocultural tensions and values inherent in many examples of comics art and in contemporary notions of schooling. Using contact zone precepts and terminology is especially useful when examining texts that embrace pedagogy, as the *X-Men* titles have for most of their fifty-year history. I assert that teachers at the college and secondary levels should consider applying the lens of contact zone theory to explications and examinations of comics texts and that doing so in the secondary and university classroom can open up discussions not only about comics but about the contemporary educational settings in which students find themselves. Keeping with Pratt's assertion that autoethnographic texts should be examined for their sociocultural importance in shaping individuals and cultures, I draw from my own early reading experiences and examine how the X-Men series of comic books illuminated power relations for me. I focus specifically on two issues,

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Classic X-Men #1 and *Uncanny X-Men* # 196. I further claim that due to comics' history as texts that have been "lumped together" regarding their literary and pedagogical merit despite the variety of genres and topics they address and as texts that have often met with suspicion or apprehension from many teachers and other facets of society, by considering the medium for integration into the classroom, teachers are taking steps to initiate learning rooted in contact zone principles.

Getting Started: The Vocabulary of the Contact Zone

Contact zone theory has a complex terminology. Herein, I define terms before explicating examples from *X-Men* and other comics, graphic novels, and proto-comics texts that illustrate the terms at work. I start with a definition of the contact zone itself and then offer definitions for the terms that stem from that over-arching construct: Contact zones are defined by Pratt as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" and where those involved in the educational experience may "reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today" (Pratt 2002, p.4). Essential to contact zones are safe houses. Safe houses are "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, [and] temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (Pratt 2002, p.17). Pratt situates contact zone theory in autoethnography and autoethnographic text, defined as text "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with

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representations others have made of them….autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those texts" (Pratt 2002, pgs. 5-6).

Transculturation, speech acts, and unsolicited oppositional discourse are other important contact zone constructs. Transculturations are "processes whereby members of subordinated groups or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by dominant or metropolitan culture" (Pratt 2002, p.9). To Pratt, speech acts are too often homogenous, monolingual representations of voices of power (read *teacher-based* or *based in dominant discourses*) which need to be transformed into dialogic entities. Unsolicited oppositional discourse, along with parody, resistance, and critique, need more attention in educational settings. Students engaged in less teacher-centered modes of learning may feel more free to challenge norms and engage in critical literacy practices, making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections as they feel comfortable discussing their own, other people's, and other entities' positions and positionality.

Intertwined Histories: The Contact Zone, Visual Texts, Comics, and Authentic Learning Potentiality

It is also important to note that contact zone theory is particularly imagetext-friendly in the terms of how WJT Mitchell describes it. According to Mitchell, imagetexts are "composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text" successfully. They stand in opposition to instances of image-text, which "designates *relations* of the visual and verbal," and image-text, which refers to instances of cleavage in print and visual interactions (Mitchell 1994, p.89). Pratt draws from ancient Andean proto-comics (which I describe in later paragraphs) that

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successfully combine word and image and from baseball cards, once ubiquitously lumped with comic books as similar collectibles and passions, to help explain several of the contact zone-specific terms mentioned above, and she mentions her son's affinity for baseball cards – along with comics, a form of multimodal textuality that offers informative text and visuals – as one of the few examples of authentic literacy engagement he experiences, due to traditional schooling's often monolithic structures:

> Sam [her son] and Willie [his friend] learned a lot about phonics that year by trying to decipher surnames on baseball cards [most notably Manny Trillo, who they dub "Many Trails," and Carl Yastrzemski], and a lot about cities, states, heights, weights, places of birth, stages of life….I watched Sam apply his arithmetic skills to working out batting averages and subtracting retirement years from rookie years; I watched him develop senses of patterning and order by arranging and rearranging his cards for hours on end, and aesthetic judgment by comparing different photos, different series, layouts, and color schemes. (Pratt 2002, p.1)

Pratt mentions geography, history, economics, and socialization as other areas in which Sam's multiple literacies grew via exploring the cards. Yet, she finds it "unforgivable that schooling itself gave him nothing remotely as meaningful to do, let alone anything that would actually take him beyond the referential, masculinist ethos of baseball and its lore" (Pratt 2002, p.3). Comics too have a reputation of having a masculine ethos, but it is remarkable how even super-hero comics connect to contact zone concepts. A classic example is how various heroes often first meet: first they approach one another cautiously as villains (meet). They then discover similar

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but also opposing agendas (clash) and fight. Finally, they work out their conflict and come to terms with finding common ground or parting ways (grapple/resolve).

Cultural contact, conflict, and transculturations are inherently intertwined with any type of education, and sequential art – as comics *and* proto-comics -- has a long history of being used to educate in the sense of creating and dispersing interpretations of history laced with specific values and from specific points of view. Many trace sequential art's history to the ancient past (McCloud 1993; Eisner 1996). Scott McCloud even leads readers through an interpretation of what he calls "A pre-Columbian picture manuscript 'discovered' by Cortes around 1519" (1993, p.10) and uses it as a historical jumping point *backwards* through time, to the Bayuex Tapestry, a piece of sequential art detailing the Norman Conquest of 1066 as told by the decendents of the winners, and to certain Egyptian hieroglyphics. Rodolphe Töpffer, a Swiss school teacher working in the late 19th century, is often credited with creating the first genuine sequential art narratives with enough recognizable form to be considered forerunners of comics and graphic novels (Kunzle 2007). This work, started roughly in the 1820s, "employed cartooning and panel borders, and featured the first independent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe" (McCloud 1993, p.17). This work began as a hobby. He often created picture-stories for his pupils' and friends' amusement (De Sa 2003). Töpffer, considered to be the father of the comic book, was by trade a *teacher*, establishing his own boarding school for boys at about the same time as scholars have traced his earliest proto-comics, but this particular connection to education and the contact zone, while interesting, is fairly coincidental. Since Töpffer, artists such as Lynd Ward (see Ward 1974), Frans Masereel (see Masereel 1998; Donahue 2005), and many others have explored and expanded the concept of sequential art, many times as a means to tell

controversial stories and/or make serious or satirical social commentary. Even these proto-comics were meeting and grappling in the context of their social settings, engaging the contact zone before it was named as such.

Another way in which comics have been grappling in contact zone precepts is through the stigma of being thought of as a "low" medium of little merit, or even as a medium at all. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester chronicle this tension in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (2004). The collection reprints comics-centered commentary from the likes of E.E. Cummings, Umberto Eco, Thomas Mann, Marshall McLuhan, and others. Many of the writers included from the first half of the twentieth century speak to the wariness that many may still feel towards the combination of words and pictures in sequence: they are worried that comics are low forms of entertainment, for the masses; they want it made clear that comics are diversionary, not at all literature; there is the fear that they are harmful, responsible for a dumbing down of culture at large, that they are addictive like narcotics. In fact, in the collection Dorothy Parker grudgingly admits she likes comic strips, but in the same way a junkie likes shooting cocaine (Heer & Worcester 2004, p.35).

Indeed, in 1954 psychologist Fredrick Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* suggested that comic book reading promoted violence and homosexuality, among other behaviors he considered vices. His work, which can be seen as part and parcel of the moral and political hysteria that defined much of 1950s American culture, led to the creation of the Comics Code Authority, which still regulates the content of some comics, most notably *Archie* and its related titles. Wertham might have been the most visible figure in the anti-comics argument, but librarians, parents and politicians had been expressing concern over comics' literary value and

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societal worth before, during, and after Wertham's influence led to senate hearings and proposed legislation to heavily regulate the comics industry. Perhaps this possibility of dangerous influence is why, until just lately (Carter 2007; Frey and Fisher 2008; Thompson 2008), graphic novels have gained little attention in the secondary classroom, though there has even been a recent spate of censorship cases involving graphic novels in public and school libraries and classrooms. It should be noted that many educators and scholars were writing articles that showed favorable relationships between comics and literacy. Indeed, articles in respected academic journals illustrating comics' benefit to readers began appearing in the 1940s, and several journals allotted space for those who tried to discredit Wertham's claims. Editions of *The Journal of Educational Sociology* appearing in 1944 and 1949 focused almost solely on the positive relationships between comics and their readers.

Contemporary Comics Narratives and Contact Zones

These aspects of sequential art narratives' history show that they are entwined with concepts of education, influence, and tangible social consequence. Comics just seem to have a quality of subversive danger about them for many, whether they merit it or not (unfortunately, a common perspective is to think if all comics as the same regardless of the variety of themes and topics they address and age-ranges to which they cater, though there is evidence that teachers are starting to see the myriad qualities of the medium). Not until concepts of literacy, learning, and meaning were expanded could this medium be properly imported to the classroom. Perhaps this is because sequential art narratives seem to inherently create contact zones in school settings, to create the potential for dissonance and to reveal difference, something that traditional, over-homogenizing pedagogies tend to avoid.

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The serious content of many graphic novels and comics may be indicative of this point. *Pedro and Me* (Winnick 2000), for example, explores homosexuality and socio-sexual responsibility via AIDs prevention. Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer-prize winning *Maus* (1986) explores concepts of authority, supremacy, and genocide. Ho Che Anderson's *King* (2005) explores racism throughout Martin Luther King Jr's life. Brian K. Vaughn and Nicho Henrichon's *Pride of Baghdad* (2006) considers consequences of the Iraq War. *The 9/11 Report* graphic novel adaptation by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon (2006) and Alissa Torres' *American Widow* (2008) deal with 9/11 and its aftermath. Similar themes are examined in even popular comics such as *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Uncanny X-Men.* Both have explored domestic violence, drug abuse, stereotyping and racial profiling, among other social issues (Daniels 1991). Green Arrow's sidekick was revealed to be a drug addict in an influential run in that hero's eponymous series. Even series featuring heroes such as the Hulk and Iron Man, as their recent film incarnations have illustrated, ask subtle serious questions about the balance between humanity and technology, the mind and the heart, ethics, commerce, and responsibility. These are not always easy topics to broach in the classroom. But some form of discourse must take on the challenge of exploring difficult topics, and there is no shortage of means available by which to do so if teachers or students find it important work.

Pratt's pointing to the ancient case of Guaman Poma, the Andean responsible for *The First New Chronicle and Good Government*, a series of letters dated 1613 and written in Quecha and rough Spanish, reveals the visual text of proto-comics as discourse not afraid to enter the contact zone. The letters address King Phillip of Spain and offer a critical retelling of Spanish conquest in his region from the point of view of the conquered, sometimes using his native

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language, other times Spanish. Pratt uses the letters as an example of writing that illustrates the contact zone and its principles. Guaman Poma's work is a perfect example of contact zone theory in action, and it retains a connection to comics and graphic novels as well, though this may not have been apparent to Pratt. Just as graphic novels combine words and pictures to create hybrid forms, so too did the letters via their meshing of languages and the inclusion of over 400 illustrations. As Pratt says, "the transcultural character of Guaman Poma's text is intricately apparent in its visual as well as its written component" (Pratt 2002, p.9).

The first image on the next page of this essay shows figures talking to one another, words issuing from their mouths as in contemporary comics, though without word balloons. The second image shows a page arranged very much like a comic book, with panels and an apparent sequence to the story, which details Spaniards abusing their power over the Incas. The page layout is specific and intentional, just as it is in today's best graphic novels: "The Spaniard is in a high position indicating dominance, but on the 'wrong' (right hand) side. The diagonals of his lance and that of the servant doing the flogging mark the line of illegitimate, though real, power," to represent Guaman Poma's interpretation of the world the Spaniards had crafted, a "world in reverse" (Pratt 2002, p. 10). I see this as an ancient reading of the word as world (Freire 1970), an instance where word and image combine to make political critique of an imbalanced power structure. Furthermore, McCloud argues that the borders, or gutters, between the panels of sequential art narratives are as important as the images themselves. Within these gutters is the passage of time and space, where the sequence is and where the action develops. Perhaps the Guaman Poma images, which may be considered proto-comics, are the very early

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examples of the various intellectual and cultural "border crossings" pertinent to contact zone theory today (Strine 1993; Mendoza 1994).

Figures 1 & 2: Images from http://www.nwe.ufl.edu/~stripp/2504/pratt.html

Pratt says that Guaman Poma's second letter is an autoethnographic text, one "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them….that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those texts" (Pratt 2002, pgs. 5-6). She sees Guaman Poma's hybrid language and even his attempts at writing in general as "oppositional representation" (p.7). Guaman Poma writes using the language of his oppressors but also does not allow them to cancel out his authentic voice. Many of the best graphic novels are autobiographical, and many cross over into Pratt's conceptualization of autoethnography as well. For example, *Maus* (1986) is not just Art

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Spiegelman's biography or a retelling of his father's, but a discourse situated in the languages and cultures of first-generation immigrants, their American children, and various perspectives of family and world (see Chute 2006). Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) is told from the perspective of an Iranian female who has immigrated to France and has a complex, multicultural worldview based on her experiences as insider and stranger. Her words may not be hybrid constructs, but her perspectives are.

Self As Case Study and X-Men Comics as Exemplars

In respect for Pratt's focus on autobiographical texts, I state readily that two of the earliest comic books I can remember reading on my own, *Uncanny X-Men* #196 (1985) and *Classic X-Men* #1 (1986), when I was eight and nine years old, respectively, are also excellent examples of contact zone theory via visual texts. These two comics helped me recognize and explore power relations at a young age and influenced my perceptions of equity and equality. While the X-Men series has been exemplary throughout its history, I do not claim that every super-hero comics or every X-Men comic is a suited for exploring specific contact zone principles as these two (though I do posit that any comics text *can* open up discussions of import in contact zone theory, even super-hero comics, of which the X-Men titles are examples and which have often been considered "the lowest genre of a low form"). These two issues are particularly salient in my personal development, though. In addition, these issues show contact zones at work in a school setting.

The X-men series features an ensemble of super-powered mutants, or people born with latent powers and abilities gained at the onset of puberty that sets them apart from other humans.

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As such, mutants are outcasts from most parts of society, misunderstood and perceived of as a threat by the status quo. Professor Charles Xavier is a mutant himself, and also the headmaster of a school for mutants. In these comics, his recruitment processes are laced with ideals of acceptance, safety, and changing perspectives. His School for Gifted Youngsters in Westchester, NY, is a place where his students can meet the challenges that would face them for the rest of their lives, feel safe to clash with populist notions of equality, equity, race, gender, religion, and each other, and grapple with multiple perspectives from students of various ages, origins and experiences. In short, Charles Xavier's is an institution of critical pedagogy, a school where the contact zone is almost always engaged.

In the two comics I have mentioned, students at the school often inform one another's growing sense of identity and place in a complex, multicultural world. Notions of gender, religion, nationality, loyalty, and even cooperation are tested as the characters realize the asymmetries in their various power dynamics and those affecting them outside school grounds. What is bothersome to Pratt, as is implicit in her conversation about Willy and his baseball cards, is that, unlike the Xavier Institute, contemporary schooling often fails to provide adequate opportunities to examine such relationships. So, a study of the contact zone in the X-Men series can extrapolate to a study of actual school dynamics if teachers care to examine them overtly with students, which Pratt and I feel they should. One way of overtly examining school dynamics might be to ask students to trace their own "schooling histories" via creating autoethnographic writings prior to or after examining a comics text. For example, with pre-service education students taking an all-graphic novel- themed section of Young Adult Literature, I asked students to journal daily on the graphic novels they read. They began and ended their journaling by

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writing about their notions of comics as teaching tools before and after the class. This discursive safe house of student writing helped students to open up in class discussion, even though they knew the professor was a strong proponent of the form in school settings. The revelation that many of them were not allowed to read or never considered reading comics in their pre-college schooling years also helped us to form the basis for how we needed to approach the topic. We didn't read any X-Men comics for that course, but doing so would have brought portrayals of school dynamics even more to the fore of our thinking.

It is important to take a brief aside to mention that intrinsic to autoethnographic texts is transculturation. Pratt says of transculturations that they are "processes whereby members of subordinated groups or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by dominant or metropolitan culture" (Pratt 2002, p.9). She also posits that the "pedagogical arts of the contact zone" include "exercises in storytelling and in identifying with ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others' experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison (including unseemly comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms)" (Pratt 2002, p.17). Since comics and their readers have always seemed to be considered on the counter- or fringe-culture, the argument could be made that any modern sequential art narrative is worthy of study by means of the contact zone. Comics' and graphic novels' artists, writers and readers are subordinated within the standards of the culture at large, and creators' work has often been considered crude and vernacular (see e.g., Wertham, 1954; Marsh and Millard 2001; Heer and Worcester, 2003).

To be sure, there are many examples of transculturation in even the most popular super-hero comics. For example, Superman can be read as creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's

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transculturated and re-appropriated adolescent response to feeling dominated by a culture that respected only narrow definitions of manliness, being Jewish, and even being American (both were teenagers and children of Jewish immigrants). Furthermore, Superman is the ultimate American immigrant, hailing from another planet and acculturated by Kansas farmers who adopt him when he is an infant (see Hadju 2008). Even if one chooses to ignore the influences of the creators' cultures, Superman offers an excellent paragon of transculturation as he finds his place on Earth while exploring his unique heritage as well.

Reversing the perspective from the character to that of those he influences, one could claim that, as a super-man, his interpretations of right and wrong and proper cultural behavior actually become the dominant standards and that those who feel his wrath or sense of justice are subordinated. This leads to the intriguing idea that the villains he faces must "select and invent from materials transmitted by" (Pratt 2002, p.9) Superman, the dominant cultural force. Superman's one weakness – and a material often procured by his enemies to subvert his dominance – is kryptonite, an element transmitted from his home planet upon its destruction.

That so many early comics creators are Jewish[1] is also an area in which we can see comics taking the dominant American culture and using it to their own ends and means while at the same time intermingling with and even creating artifacts of that dominant culture. The X-Men series created by Jewish artists Stan Lee and Jack Kirby can be read as an allegory of racism, and Marvel comics basically built their empire on stories featuring super-powered misfits, those who railed against the norms of society in one way or another. It might seem so at

[1] The aforementioned Seigel and Shuster, and Art Spiegelman; Will Eisner, Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, Stan Lee and many others.

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first glance, but it is actually far from ironic that such paragons of "referential, masculinist ethos" (Pratt 2002, p.3) as comic book heroes transculturate so well. We recognize transculturation and reappropriation in music, slang, and other "counter" cultures (consider the use of "nigger" or "dyke" or "bitch," all words that can be seen as insults when used by the dominant culture but which have been appropriated as terms of endearment or badges of honor by the sublimated groups themselves, here African Americans and women, respectively).

Returning to the X-Men series of comics, *Uncanny X-Men # 196* (Claremont and Romita, Jr. 1985) wonderfully illustrates this potential for comics to do the same. In one scene, Kitty Pryde, a naive, curly-haired teenage student at the Xavier Institute (who reminded me of my mother when I first read the comic) and fledgling X-Man is approached by a group of young men intent on doing harm to mutants. The group is led by Phil, an African American. "You a ***mutie***?" he asks belligerently ("mutie" is a racist term that the comics use to describe anyone who is a "mutant," someone born with special powers). She replies, "Gee I dunno Phil, are you a ***nigger***?" Even as an eight-year-old in rural North Carolina, I knew this was a major scene. Here there are two students from different cultures and races (Phil is not a mutant) using language that when transculturated or re-appropriated is sometimes considered a thing of pride, but when used

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in the dominant culture's sense of the word, is highly hurtful and pejorative.

Figure 4: Kitty and Phil Exchange Equally Hurtful Terms

Kitty and Phil are both members of different cultural groups often considered marginal (mutants on the one hand and African Americans on the other) but attempt to goad one another by using the dominant culture's racist connotation of the words. There are no mutants in real life, of course, and this fact might provide teachers a means by which to explore the concept of transculturation via this particular example with the necessary distance: In this regard, "mutie" can become a linguistic safe house in which students can explore the hateful power of words. This scene between Kitty and Phil is an outstanding example of students meeting, clashing and grappling with cultural forces. As a young reader, the bolded words immediately showed me that

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I was supposed to equate mutant's struggles with those of African Americans; certainly my Southern roots had already exposed me to that "real-life" racial slur, and I understood Kitty and her compatriots in a deeper, more empathetic manner than ever after reading this scene.

That scene is just one of the critical literacy moments in this issue. In another subplot, hero Nightcrawler questions his Catholic faith, having just encountered the Beyonder, a force that seems to be able to create and destroy at will. The contact with a godlike figure has him clashing with notions of religion and grappling with remaining faithful in the sight of such a force. Having come face-to-face with a viewpoint, a life world so opposed to his own, Nightcrawler is in agony. He must grapple with the experience, finding a way to resolve conflicts while respecting alternative possibilities. He is, in effect, being taken to school in a manner consistent with unsettling but important "big issue" conflicts that Pratt wants to see at the center of the classroom and with which she feels students must engage to better understand their worlds and the people that inhabit them. Teachers could use this example to open up discussions of how various religious tenets intersect and conflict, just as the example with Kitty provides a means of exploring racism.

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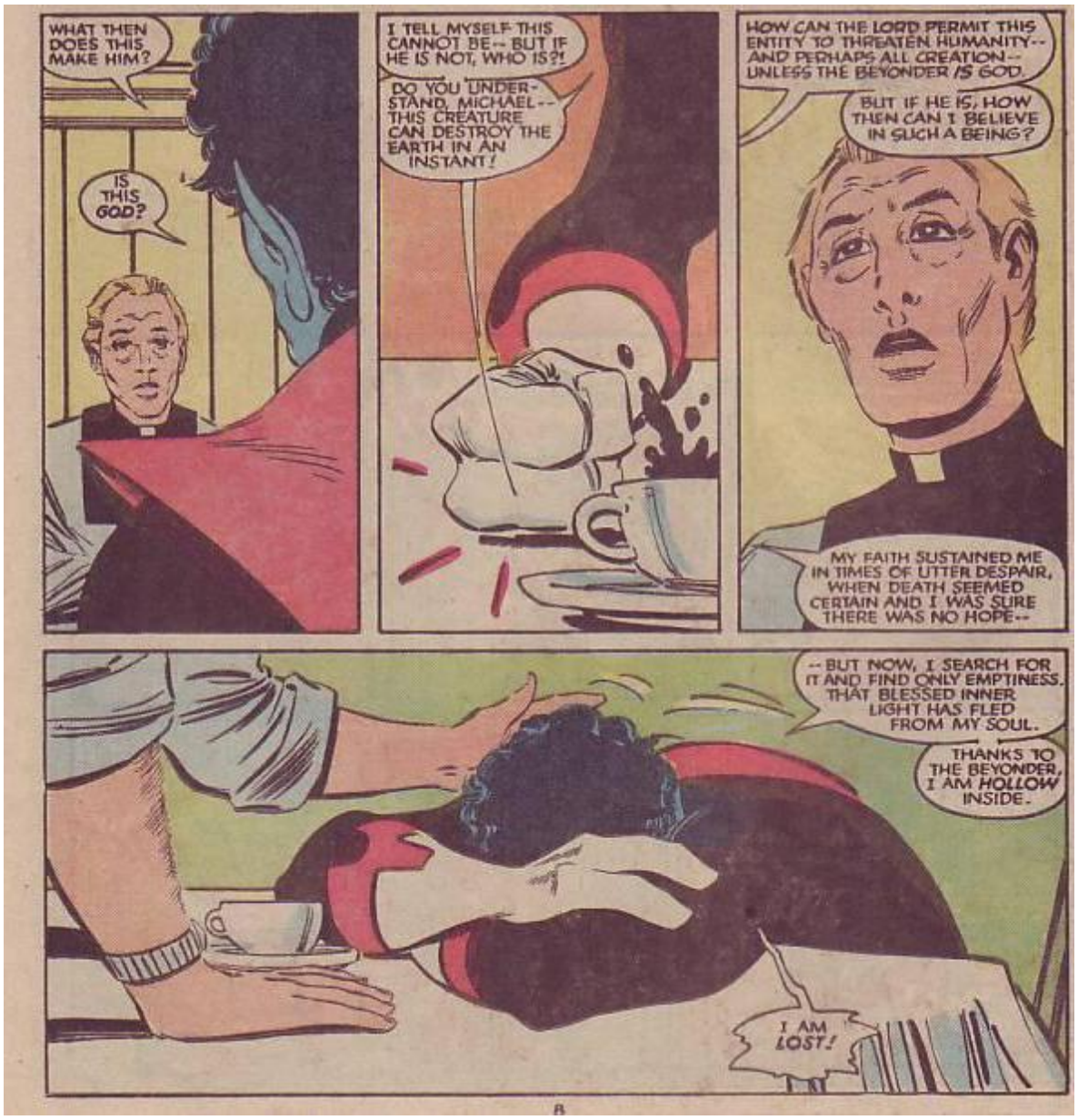

Figure 5: Nightcrawler Questions His Faith

The issue ends when Rachel, a telepathic and telekinetic, "hears" Kitty's cries once Phil attacks. Phil fires a shot, but Rachel turns the bullet around and aims it as his head. Magneto, the master of magnetism and a Holocaust survivor who saw his family killed by Nazi forces, stops the bullet and holds it steady at Phil's head, asking Rachel if she wants to act like those who kill

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for hate. Rachel's choice is one that many of us have had to make: sink to the level of those that hate, or rise above the temptation while having to acknowledge that there will always be those who dislike us simply because of who they feel we are. While Rachel may not feel the transformation she would like based on her conflict-laden lesson, she learns a powerful one that is applicable to every student in every classroom in the world – especially if teachers make room for discussions thereof, though difficult they may be.

Figure 6: Magneto Offers Rachel an Ethical Choice Despite Her Anger

An earlier scene even depicted Wolverine, a small, thick-lipped man with a gruff attitude (who reminded me of my father) teaching Kitty that his cigars aren't for kids. He lets her puff, choke and tear up, then lets her go on her way, having learned from experience that smoking isn't for her. Kittie confronts Wolverine's life choices directly. While Pratt may not have approved of her

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smoking, Kitty's courage in trying to experience life from another's interests, preferences, and point of view is indicative of the courage Pratt feels students must have to engage the contact zone. Traditional schooling seems to inhibit taking risks. Contact zone theory suggests they must happen on some scale in the classroom every day for education to have social, critical worth. In this one issue of a super-hero comic book, there are several contact zones engaged at once; issues of race, equality, hate, health, and even faith are addressed. But, then again, these are students from the exclusive Xavier School for Gifted Youngsters, not just any public school.

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Figure 7: Wolverine Tutors Kitty Through "Education via Experience"

Speech acts, power relations, and unsolicited oppositional discourse do not necessarily occur independently of the ideas presented in the preceding paragraphs. Speech acts, in Pratt's mind, tend to be homogenous and monolingual, representations of the voices of power. In the traditionalist classroom, this can be represented as the teacher's voice, which may have a tendency to dominate. Yet, Pratt suggests speech acts need to become just the opposite, and making them so will move dialogue and the classroom towards the contact zone. In comparison with comics, when someone of another language other than English speaks in a comic, it is often bracketed with a note such as "translated from Russian" at the bottom of the panel. This helps the reader to understand the intonation, language styles, and perspectives of the character, a *deus-ex-machina* means of offering a slight understanding of an otherwise possibly incomprehensible speech act. Pratt suggests that within the various concepts of the contact zone, communication must become more open, more multicultural and multilingual; dialectical just as it is dialogic. This means that working to "translate" individuals' statements is important and necessary work. The power relations need to be renegotiated away from the discourse of the teacher to the multilayered discourse of the classroom community.

Again the X-Men series is useful in exploring this point. In *Giant-Sized X-Men #1,* which I first read reprinted in 1987's *Classic X-Men* #1, when Charles Xavier must quickly form a new group of mutants to save his original seven students from a grave danger, he gathers a German acrobat, a Russian farmer, a Canadian soldier, an Irishman who was a former enemy, an African goddess, a Native American strongman, and a Japanese aristocrat. He takes them quite literally to school, to his Xavier Institute, where he will teach them along with his other students/heroes.

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Xavier knows that his students can be agents of change when properly educated. Pratt holds this supposition for her students as well. Indeed, it is the *raison d'entre* for her theory. Upon their first encounters, the professor telepathically teaches them to speak English so that they might better understand one another. Yet, they retain their native languages and often speak small phrases in their native tongues. Even though they can communicate because their teacher gave them the linguistic tools, the first few years of the series after this event was largely about their coming to terms with the levels of diversity among them, the varying linguistic and cultural traditions, individual attitudes, and, of course, how they fit in with the pre-existing school culture once the original seven students were saved and returned to the institute. Team leader and American Cyclops must deal with the Canadian Wolverine's bad attitude and constant questioning of his leadership skills, not to mention Wolverine's attraction to Cyclops' girlfriend. Five of the original seven members leave the team and school because they feel they have been displaced by the older, more rugged new recruits. The remaining members must learn to look past Nightcrawler's devilish appearance (he has features associated with that of a demon – pointed ears, tail and teeth; glowing eyes; cloven feet. He was about to be murdered for this before Xavier whisked him away) and recognize him as the charming person he is. Nightcrawler must resolve the tensions he feels between his strict Catholic faith and being on a team with those like Wolverine who have killed in cold blood.

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Figure 8: The Multicultural Cast of the X-Men

Before they can come to understandings, they have to learn to speak the same language, but, metaphorically speaking, rarely are they successful in their earliest encounters. Their speech acts must be redefined, power relations must be worked out, and oppositional unsolicited discourse, when it arises, must be handled directly and effectively. The X-Men are in a school setting engulfed in multiple contact zones, as are all students. There are ample opportunities to meet, clash, and grapple, both culturally and literally, in battle training for Xavier's mutants, in specific lessons, and even among peers in social interactions. Real-life secondary school and college is somewhat similar (sports or physical education might be the real world analogue to the X-Men's physical training, of course), as cultures often come into contact and conflict. Pratt acknowledges these zones and the speech acts, power relations, and oppositional discourses

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within them as existing in every classroom. Acknowledging their presence and crafting means by which they can be examined is a necessity for the teacher, who must allow students the opportunities to develop the skills to "speak the same language" – only without Xavier's gift of telepathy! Examining speech acts, power relations and acknowledging unsolicited oppositional discourse is not always a comfortable situation, but one that helps "every single text" stand "in specific historical relationships to the students" with a wide "range and variety" of relations at work (Pratt 2002, p.16). The X-Men series offers excellent examples of these three constructs.

I hope to have illustrated how comics and contact zone theory have strong connective tissue. Contact zone precepts can be applied to study contemporary comics, even super-hero comics, and *even proto-comics* because – despite several decades worth of apprehension and distrust for the form among sub-sets of society, including teachers – sequential art and education have a long, if not nuanced, history of supporting one another in one form or another. That "co-operation" often means supporting specific notions of power, voice, and culture as well. Texts in which school is central to the setting, such as in the X-Men books, offer particularly strong instances for examining contact zone constructs, but they aren't the only texts to do so. Further, books, films, and other visual arts set in schools (such as the Harry Potter series and Norman Rockwell paintings) are just as rich for an examination via the contact zone lens. Any textual representation of a construct, here schooling, naturally tropes or reifies aspects of the concept represented, but the most important conversations teachers and students might have is to consider the dynamics and tensions inherent in these texts to critique the social texts and contexts of their own schooling situations, their past pedagogical experiences and their current ones.

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Indeed, questions such as "What is the dominant voice in this classroom?" and "Are there safe houses established in class such that I can speak my mind and be heard?" are not just for Xavier's students. They are important for any class at any academic level.

Contemporary Lenses and Precedent Pedagogical Texts

The New London Group's Courtney B. Cazden states, "one of the central ideas of the Multiliteracies argument is that negotiating across differences is now a life-and-death matter, and literacy pedagogy has to play its part in developing the discourse skills that such negotiation requires" (2000, p.265). For Cazden, Pratt's contact zone construct is a suitable metaphor for contemporary education and includes each literacy component espoused by the New London Group: Situated Practice in the larger class; overt Instruction in 'exercises' and 'ground rules'; Critical Framing in 'critique, parody and comparison'; Transformed Practice in 'experiments in transculturation and collaborative work' (p.266). Just as I was making text-to-self connections as I saw my parents in Kitty Pryde and Wolverine; just as I was making text-to-world connections when I learned to equate "mutie" with other racial slurs, there are students in our classrooms making familiar sociocultural connections with comics, graphic novels, and manga. Just like the connections I made as an early reader via those X-Men comics, the connections are far from trivial. The issues are socio-cultural and sociopolitical in scope and may even get at the values students and teachers embrace in their classrooms concerning literary worth, gender, ability, and more. Teachers must accept comics and graphic novels into their classrooms, not just for the sake of meeting the goal of becoming "multimodal," but because of the form's potential to help students meet, clash, and grapple with the issues that do and will define them as people. Cazden

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states, "We all live in the contact zone and have to take responsibility for negotiating within it" (p.266). Overtly integrating comics into the classroom and engaging in discourse with our students about the issues they raise, asking students to consider those issues in terms of their own education and the values often placed on "appropriate" school conversation and even "appropriate" school texts, considering the unique ways in which graphic novels engage in hot-button issues, and perhaps even asking students to engage in the comics-making process themselves to express difficult, multifaceted points of view are all ways in which teachers might utilize comics in the classroom.

There are some precedents for discussing comics and graphic novels in relation to contact zone theory both in the secondary and college classrooms, and the scholarship on secondary teachers' and students' interactions with comics in the contact zone is gaining more attention. In *Reinventing English*, which explores contact zone pedagogy in the secondary English classroom, John Gaughan mentions using *Maus* as part of his unit "War and Voice – Speaking Up," but *Maus* is a quick point of reference to him before he moves on to Wiesel's *Night*. He mentions that his students find the form appealing, that the book was more impressive than he thought it would be (Gaughan 2001, p.84), and that he gives his students a cartooning option once he asks them to write about the book (p.85). Andrea Freud Loewenstein's article "Confronting Stereotypes: *Maus* in Crown Heights" (1998) is another early precedent of the form being used in tandem with contact zone principles, but Loewenstein utilizes the text to examine her and her students' specific classroom and cultural exigency. Loewenstein used *Maus* to help her Crown Heights college students explore the tensions and violence that had recently come to a head between African-Caribbean Americans and Lubavitcher Jewish residents. *Maus* "pushed [her

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students] to interrogate their own stereotyping as the authors as well as the victims of prejudice" (p.400). She says, "a remote attitude is simply not possible with *Maus*. One of Spiegelman's achievements is his constant interrogation of his own authorial position" (Loewenstein 1998, p.402). Transculturation, oppositional discourse, and power relations are clearly at work within *Maus* as Art (as the author and as a character in the book) tries to feel his way through life as the second-generation American son of Vladek, an immigrant and holocaust survivor who also happens to be a formidable oppressive force via his obsessive-compulsive and sometimes stereotypical behavior (Vladek hoards things, for example, and is a miserly spender). Vladek's tales of survival offer a narrative string that intertwines with Art's own writing about his desires to make sense of their relationship.

Loewenstein also argues that the text helps introduce students to "what Paulo Freire and other writers have called 'critical literacy,' an ideology, a language, and discourse that will enable them to see themselves as more than isolated individuals suffering from some combination of bad luck and unworthiness, but instead as part of a larger system of injustice" (Loewenstein, 1998, p. 401). She says her students often give the text too much authority, often distancing themselves from untouchable authors, but *Maus* makes this distancing difficult since Art critiques himself as a reliable storyteller. Spiegelman's own critical examination of self and world via text helps her students see that they can do the same.

In previous writings, I have mentioned the contact zone lens as one that can help teacher see comics as texts that can help transform a classroom into a more critical, self-aware sphere of learning, just as Pratt wants. In "Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving Toward our 'Optimus Prime,'" (Carter 2007b) I explicitly call for educators to consider the contact zone

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as a lens through which they may study weighty issues and mention several graphic novel titles suitable for crafting contact zones. In "Teaching Watchmen in the Wake of 9/11" (Carter 2009), I talk about how scaffolding to create prior-knowledge on topics from the 1980s helped produce instructional safe houses for freshman composition students about to embark on a reading of *Watchmen*, just as the journals with my pre-service teachers in the YA Lit class helped create discursive safe houses. I have also detailed how using comics in the classroom can raise the ire of those with power in school settings (Carter 2007a). For example, my attempts to teach *Maus* to gifted eight-graders were blocked by a central office administrator in my school district even though my principal had signed off on ordering a class set of the texts. Even when I used to teach comics composition processes to gifted students as young as sixth-graders, I would often have students ask questions like "aren't we a little old for this?" or "shouldn't we be doing something more important?" Their inquires were laced with value judgments about literary merit, age-appropriate curriculum, and even composition, but also with excitement, as if to say, "Is it OK for us to be enjoying something like this?" Their probing discourse revealed them accepting the status quo notion of comics as "low," and therefore not for gifted students such as themselves. Yet, by using the language and ideas of the dominant culture, they were also seeking a challenge of it (speech acts and transculturation!). These value judgments were revisited once students began actually creating their own comics and saw how much critical thinking and process work goes into doing so. Through work, their attempts at transculturation carried through to reveal new attitudes on comics art. Similar attitudes were revealed in the YA Lit class as students' pre-comics reading journals often expressed reserve about comics in the classroom, but post-reading journals at the end of the term revealed at least a willingness to consider them as pedagogical

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tools. Another way of looking at examples from my own experiences is that with the sixth graders, and to some extent with the college students as well, I was able to be the hegemonic voice of power with those students, like I could not be with the administrator from the central office. Indeed, as a teacher aware and accepting of contact zone principles, much of my work is influencing students to transculturate -- to at least *consider* my point of view – without dominating their discourse or completely destroying their critical, and often times informative, dissent. I don't want to create safe houses where they can share speech acts of oppositional discourse only to blow over those houses with hurricane-force counterpoints, even if I have the ability to do so. I try, instead, to tease out their opinions and offer information that will allow *them* to transform their thoughts, not me.

Most recently in print, Michael Bitz (2009) discusses the contact zone in relation to his four -year qualitative study of students engaged in the creation of manga through an afterschool program called the Comic Book Project. He says that whereas traditional schooling had failed his student in many ways, most particularly in valuing specific forms of knowledge and experience over others, the program allowed them to bridge the divides of the lives they wanted to lead and their school lives. Bitz says,

> These teenagers were butting against what they were "supposed" to be, and all the terms that a stranger on the subway might have applied to them at first sight: thug, gangbanger, gangsta … the list of derogatory epithets could fill pages. By embracing manga, the teens entered what Mary Louise Pratt has defined as a "contact zone," where a person meets, clashes, and grapples with accepted societal norms" (2009, p.15).

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So, there is some evidence that teachers at the college and secondary levels are beginning to see the potential for comics art to illustrate education in the contact zone *and* to overtly examine those interconnections.

Concluding Thoughts

Further, comics studies continues to meet, clash, and grapple with ways to extend basic conversations about comics' literary worth when exploring with students and colleagues why comics might be utilized in a classroom setting. Charles Hatfield talks of boundaries and borders in "How to Read A…" (2008) and how comics, which he sees as "interdisciplinary" (as do I), require the "hopping of professional borders and the intermingling of theories and methods drawn from many different disciplines" (p.129). Considering comics' place in the curriculum attends to what Hatfield calls "boundary-dissolving" (p.130) in terms of what often constitutes literary study in that it offers the potential for accepting texts and forms into the classroom that might once have been relegated to outside reading at best. Thierry Groensteen (2007) has recently articulated a theory of comics in which he talks about the iconic solidarity of the system of comics, one in which the form is defined by a unique spatio-topical relationship. Basically, he says that images within panels are situated in the particular moment in time and in the narrative, but also contribute to the overall form of the narrative. Further, certain panels may be "braided" together in terms of their importance and in the readers' comprehension of their shared content. Groensteen states accurately that in comics, all images are always already framed, not only by the borders that separate them but also by the page, the borders of the book or pamphlet that covers it, and by the cognition of the reader. Hatfield and Groensteen's works reveal that comics, just by being engaged by a cognizant person, are already in social contact and conflict with their

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readers, already in discourse, jostling ideas of high-low, border crossing, overstepping boundaries, and constantly asking readers to reconsider the "always already" value judgment.

As I mentioned earlier, in super-hero comics, often when heroes meet for the first time, "the first interaction with everyone of one's kind is a physical tussle" (Wolk 2007, p.101). It appears to me that serious study of comics in the classroom, encompassing both what they are and what they can convey, already accounts for a discursive opportunity to enter the contact zone, if only teachers accept comics' potentials. In an era when secondary teachers are asked to be powerless while simultaneously super-human, we can't lose sight of our students' need for building understanding in new, multiliterate ways. Therefore, students must be allowed the opportunity to meet, clash, and grapple with comics art in the English Language Arts classroom and other school settings such as at university. Doing so not only expands their knowledge of comics and their pedagogical and social relevancies and potentials, but offers a means to engage in critical conversations about the nature of their own past and current schooling exigencies.

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Figures 9 & 10: Multiple Contact Zones at Work in Xavier's School

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